

I Read It in *The Times* April 23

History Today has written several articles in the past about poor State Department communications security during the latter half of the 19th century. There were a number of reasons for this—funding, expertise, technology, complacency. But did the State Department really believe that its codes were secure? If the following item, mostly taken verbatim from *The New York Times* on April 3, 1897, is believed at face value, the answer is yes.

“Washington, April 2—The State Department officials scout the suggestion that any unauthorized person has obtained a knowledge of the communications passing between the department and Consul General (Fitzhugh) Lee at Havana (Cuba). It is said that even if such a person had come into possession of the cipher code of the department, it would not avail him in learning the contents of dispatches. The code of the State Department is one of the most inscrutable cryptograms in the world.”*

Those versed in American History will recognize that in the late 1890s the United States was heavily involved in Cuba, monitoring the uprising there of the native Cubans against their Spanish overlords. About a year after this press story, the United States would in fact be at war with Spain (the 1898 Spanish-American War). CCH does not know who the unauthorized person was but assumes that the incident actually happened.

For the record, it is the *New York Times* that is vouching for the integrity of the codes rather than the State Department itself.* Of note is that roughly one year later, right before the war with Spain broke out, the State Department was alerted by one of its own consular officials (General Horace Porter, U.S. Minister to France) that Spain indeed had a copy of the State Department code book (the Red Book, named for the color of its cover), which had been in use since 1876.

The State Department did change its codebook—albeit after the war—employing in May 1899 the Blue Code, designed by John Haswell, a State Department archivist who had also designed the 1876 Red Book. Why after the war and not

before? CCH suspects that the State Department, erring on the side of caution, sought the new book as soon as possible. Although undoubtedly expedited, it could not be finished in time.

This is the same Fitzhugh Lee, by the way, who had been a Confederate general in the Civil War. The nephew of Robert E. Lee, he later became governor of Virginia and would serve again as a general in the Spanish-American War.

Principal sources: *New York Times* article, April 3, 1897; *Masked Dispatches: Cryptograms and Cryptology in American History, 1775-1900* (CCH publication); Wikipedia background information on Fitzhugh Lee.

Read *Masked Dispatches* in softcopy at [[insert nsa.gov link](#)].